

This is a fascinating history of the Wagtails written by one of the first members of the Club. It details the evolution of the Club from 1992 to 1999. Several names mentioned are still members including Elsie Stone (who still swims at Galas and was made an honorary member at the AGM in 2015).

### **FROM TINY ACCORNS, MIGHTY WAGTAILS GREW**

Twenty-three years ago, in 1992, more or less when the Barcelona Olympic Games were in progress, the first stirrings of our club evolved. It was an idea formed by a physio-therapist, called Helen Smith, from Bournemouth Hospital and, no relation, Mike Smith from B.T., who endeavoured to start a swimming session for Disabled people to exercise. At that time, during the Summer, it was an open session for the public but with hopes; if enough people took up the offer of joining in, a club could be formed: which, if successful, from the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1993, the "Wagtails" would have sole use of the swimming pool. Oh, what heady days they were, with the water temperature of 31 degrees Celsius, and not the Fahrenheit scale as it is today (but that is an entirely different story)!

In case the text dwells upon the gala side of the club, it is best to point out from the very outset of this potted history, the ever evolving committee have not and never will lose sight of the original concept of the club, namely to help the disabled to exercise and gain confidence in the water, and, for some, overcome the fear of the water. To achieve all these goals, down the twenty-three years of the clubs' existence, there has been a constant flow of selfless, dedicated helpers who give up their time, to work in the changing rooms and/or help in the water, which, without their tireless efforts, the club would, and could not exist. Without trying to pick out members at the cost of forgetting the list of other vital helpers; which is as long as your arm, it is right to mention Di Green, who, if not an original helper, must have been among the first, so thank you very much.

It is not right to expect the same faces to turn up each week, so an all-out effort must be made to seek out, and encourage, others to join the club in this respect, especially through the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. This is because they are younger, and, therefore, naturally on the same wave length as some of those they are helping. The only downside to this is, quite naturally, these young volunteers go off to College or University, so we have to train others to take their place (now get off your 'soap box' and get on with it!).

On 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1993, the inaugural AGM was convened, where the Chairman (this was before P.C.), only attained the position for the sole reason of replying "ER" instead of "no" as everyone else asked had done previously. Thankfully, the Chairman was ably supported by Tom Kelly, Jo Down, Philip Mole and an accountant called Peter, who was the treasurer (Now, where was it he went? The Caymen Islands.....? Well, it was something like that.....)

One of our first bits of luck was Alec Mack, who worked for the Queen Elizabeth Leisure Centre as a life-guard, because, before long, members found an interest in swimming, as well as exercising. Alec discarded his life-guard mantle and concentrated all his efforts upon teaching water confidence and swimming to enthusiastic members wanting to do so. It has to be said that, in all the time he worked with the club, despite the numerous variety of disabilities, Alec was never at a loss for a solution to any problem a swimmer thought was impossible to overcome. Slowly, a group swimmers began to grow!

1996 was an eventful year, for it was when the "fast lane" came into being after a suggestion at that year's AGM. A "fast lane" had been seen in use at Ferndown Leisure Centre during the disabled session there, enabling the more "enthusiastic" swimmers to be kept from 'bumping into' or 'frightening' exercising members who were still over-coming their fears. Also, that year, Rita Matthews joined the committee, who, as well as being a helper, was a first class swimmer (even at full speed, she hardly stirred the water) and had the perfect aptitude with the less able members, who loved her dearly.

Tom was never short of energy too! Having been given an idea of holding swimming galas; during a Committee meeting, he ferreted around and eventually came across the "Halliwick Method" group. Alas, although they held galas on a national scale, no clubs within our area did. Back to square one, but Tom remained undaunted, and, after some time found N.A.S.C.H. It was not long after this that another bit of luck struck in the form of the indomitable Rusty Garner, who also took the chair during that year. He, because he owned the Red Lion at the time, proved quite handy when Irene Wills, the South-west Area Chief, visited from Plymouth on a courtesy call to welcome us into the South-west region. Rusty wined and dined her, along with the rest of the committee, in a manner that had not been bestowed on Irene before.

So, in 1998, during the half-term of Sherborne School, a small band of intrepid members drove there. At the time, well, at that pool, all swimmers had to wear a swimming cap (lest....I won't go into details, you

know what I mean!) The members who took part had a double whammy of pleasure for taking part, because the following week, the non-swimming members that were left behind, cheered the roof off when they saw the group's successful collection of medals. By now the tools were in place to flourish and only time was needed. At that time, gala swimmers still made their individual way to far flung venues, such as Street or Plymouth. On the first occasion, one member went there alone, driving home directly after swimming (stupid boy!!!). The following year, Josh went too. Seeing the determination to fly the flag to no matter where, we gained the use of a minibus, driven by Tom, Rita, or, later on, Debbie White. All three deserve a special cheer for their selfless effort. Success breeds success, encouraging others to join the steadily growing, happy band.

Nineteen ninety-nine saw Elsie Stone (later, our only female chair-person to date – where are you ladies? Don't be shy in coming forward!), reach the N.A.S.C.H National Finals, held in Royal Leamington Spa. So, on a cold, bright November day, three member set out, with Rita doing the driving. As Elsie represented the South-west region, it was a chance to see other regional members as colleagues rather than friendly adversaries. This is as it should be, after all, the real foe is the disability, not the person trying to cope with it!!!

One bonus springing from belonging to both Halliwick and N.A.S.C.H was that we came in contact with other affiliated members at a N.A.S.C.H AGM, where we discovered that, because not enough regions (including the Welsh!) wanted to take part in the Halliwick World Finals held in Denmark, Britain would not be represented. So the Wagtails joined a group from Hull to make the trip off their own bat, bringing a haul of medals from the qualifying rounds. So, well done to all of you, and, whilst on the subject, "Golden girl" Lisa, is the only remaining member of the original gala squad – well done!

It was about this time in 2007, the first steps to gaining charity status began, led by Brian Russell, the then chairman. He had plenty of knocks right from the very start, however, Brian was not to be discouraged.

Another major transformation took place during the early noughties with the installation of 'walk-in steps' to enable easier access to the pool. These were first seen at the Plymouth Pisces venue for their less-able members to use. It must be pointed out, however, along with a huge amount of gratitude, that once the manager of our Leisure Centre had the matter of the steps brought to his attention (he also just happened to be visiting Plymouth shortly afterwards), looked into the feasibility of providing these steps and brought the request into fruition. To some, it may not seem much, but for those who risked life and limb negotiating the tiled, vertical ladder built into the side of the pool, it made entering and exiting the pool so much easier. The use of the dreaded 'ducking stool' was, and still is, in use, for those unable to negotiate the steps. These patrons still, alas, have to suffer the increasing cold as the water creeps up their body as they descend into the water within the pool. It was, and is, purgatory, just ask those who know!

If there is one theme running through this saga, it is the dedicated work of the Committee since the club's conception. It is not just the giving up of time for meetings on a bright sunny evening, when others are enjoying the sun, or conversely, setting out on in the depth of a cold winter's night, whilst others are snug at home. It is putting into motion the vision of the future which arises from these meetings which creates the platform for improvements at so many levels. So let us not forget their efforts for our benefit; and perhaps, raise our hands when they ask us for help at AGM's or at other times. After all, they would not ask unless they needed to. So let us take our hats off to the present committee's hard work, since 2007, for finally steering us through to the Charity status we all now enjoy, and to the others for their hard work since that inaugural AGM back in February 1993.

Apologies to those not cited, for breaking the golden rule of either mentioning everybody or nobody by name, but, whilst the latter would be impossible to make a coherent dialogue, the former would rely on a perfect memory, so blame my memory and the lack of space. All good wishes for the future.